

Analytic Framework Description: Healthy School Meals for All

The analytic framework depicts postulated pathways through which Healthy School Meals for All increase access to, and participation in, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). Healthy School Meals for All may improve dietary, physical and mental health, and academic outcomes for all students in a participating school. Because the NSLP and SBP serve as the foundation for Healthy School Meals for All interventions, we start by describing outcomes associated with participation in these existing meal programs. Meals through the NSLP and SBP are provided to students that participate in these programs. Participation in the NSLP and SBP leads to increased consumption of nutritious school meals which may lead to improved food and nutrition security including reduced disruption of eating patterns, improved acquisition of adequate food, and increased short- and long- term consumption of healthy foods and improved dietary quality. This may lead to improvements in physical and mental health, cognitive functioning and academic achievement, and school attendance. All these outcomes may improve health equity.

Healthy School Meals for All increases access to, and participation in, the NSLP and the SBP by making meals free to all students enrolled in a school regardless of household income. Healthy School Meals for All may also improve access to NSLP and SBP for students from households with lower incomes by removing economic, administrative, language, and social barriers that may limit their participation. This may improve health equity. Healthy School Meals for All may lead to more students participating in NSLP and SBP which may lead to postulated outcomes described above. Programs may also lead to decreased household spending on meals which may lead to improved household finances, further contributing to the outcomes described above.

Key potential effect modifiers include whether breakfast, lunch, or both are provided; school level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school); and student's household income level or eligibility status for free or reduced-price meals.

Potential additional benefits include eliminating stigma associated with receiving free or reduced-priced meals and reduced administrative and meal costs for participating schools. Potential harms include plate waste and obesity.